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The Psychology of Learning Composition

By AMELIA ROBERTS FRY

"You'll be a good teacher if you don't try to teach; just give your students a chance to learn." This maxim, told me by one of my professors when I was an undergraduate, applies especially to the teaching of composition. More attention needs to be given to the *learning* side; we need to get rid of the notion that our sole duties are to stand before the class, ask and answer questions, and take up and hand back themes.

Theories of learning such as those of Pavlov, the Gestalters, James, and Thorndike are of course related to our purposes in teaching composition. Our problem here is, How? To answer that one, let us decide upon those "purposes in teaching composition": specifically, we are all agreed that our job is to teach students (1) how to observe and get ideas, (2) how to arrange those ideas, and then (3) how to express them effectively.

Now, looking at it from the learning angle instead of the teaching angle, we find that we must go to more basic purposes—purposes that are of deep concern to the student. With this in mind, we might say that our job is to help the student of composition find new skills and ideas, and to help him want to make them his own because they fill one of his needs. This brings us to one of the basic elements of the psychology of learning: What do we mean when we say a student's *needs*?

Briefly, it is these needs which make a student want to learn. Besides that, they are the only things which *can* make a student

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want to learn. Now we see why we must find out what these needs are so we can use them in the classroom. The needs stir the students into activity; a better name for them is *motives*—they motivate the student.

Let us look closer at these motives. If we should combine all our psychologists' theories of "basic motives," we would find a list several pages long. So, to facilitate our discussion, we shall use only four rather general ones as a nucleus. I believe that these are basic—that they are found in everyone. (This means your students *and* you.) Here they are: the mastery motive, the social motive, the conformity motive, and the investigating motive.¹ Of course, these motives don't really occur in four separate forms of behavior; our motives are thoroughly mixed so that each of us becomes an individual—one person with his own personality. But to get a good idea of each motive, let's look at each one by itself.

1. The *mastery* motive:

This is one of the most universal motives. It is also one of the strongest and most dependable. This strength is probably due to its direct relation to self-esteem: the student *must* excel, succeed, and overcome obstructions in some field, or his pride will receive a definite blow. If we do not help him excel in his writing, after several attempts he may turn to other methods of mastery: he may plagiarize, or he might turn his back on composition and devote his efforts to mastering only football or some other interest. Then we, the teacher, wonder why he has such a sudden switch in interest!

This is also a reason why we should challenge the student when we make an assignment. It is best to let the student know that the assignment is a difficult one, but that he can do it if he tries hard enough. After such an awakening, the student's usual behavior follows the let-me-see-what-I-can-do pattern. He knows he can be proud of what he has mastered.

2. The *social* motive:

Some psychologists believe that this is the strongest motive in the adolescent. It is close to self-approval, and it is a very positive motive. In the adolescent it is a desire for recognition and accept-

1. Sidney L. Pressey and Francis P. Robinson, *Psychology and the New Education*, Chpt. XII; and Laurance Frederic Shaffer, *Psychology of Adjustment*, Chapter IV.

ance by his own social group. He wants to be with other students, to work with them and play with them—anything to be with others. Students of the other sex are especially important to him. Activities, such as dancing, which help him realize this motive have priority with him. Activities which thwart this motive become secondary. Therefore, we must *help* him realize this motive, even in his composition class. Help him learn to mix with others in group projects, panel discussions, trips through the library, and meetings outside of class. Have student committees help with the planning of new problems for the class: group investigations to bring data to the class for argumentative papers, group meetings to decide what main principles would be included in writing (for example) a process theme, or student committees to design questions for library reference study.

I think we all see how the student will be learning other things that are important, too. And we all know the importance of learning how to work successfully with other people.

3. The *conformity* motive:

This motive is strong, but it is not as positive a motive as the social motive is. In childhood, the student's whole criterion for behavior lay in the approval or disapproval of his parents—in punishment or reward, in other words. In adolescence his criterion is much the same, although the punishment and reward is greatly modified. He is afraid of disapproval from (1) members of his social group (and that includes his teacher, too) and (2) his superiors (and that also includes his teacher), and (3) himself. He tries to conform to social customs and mores of his group. Once he has felt disapproval and disgrace in a writing activity, he may balk at that activity from that time on; at any rate, his writing will not be a happy work session in which he hopes to find mastery; it will be a very negative and tedious process for him because he is *afraid* of more disapproval. We must grant *approval* on something in his work, *always*.

4. The drive to *investigate*:

This drive is also closely related to self-esteem; it springs from the student's desire to know more about himself—and "himself" has become a vast territory of related facts and incidents by the time he has reached adolescence. He is curious about almost anything in the world around him. The drive to investigate has a biological basis, too: until a person has reached full maturity, he has a very high rate of metabolism. This abnormal amount of

energy assists in all his motives, but particularly in this one; it leads to a great deal of activity—investigating activity.

In class, we can take full advantage of this by not *telling* a student what a subordinate clause or a descriptive theme is. We should help him find out for himself. Our job is to make him wonder, to stimulate his curiosity, and to set up questions which will lead to his finding the answer. We should limit our activities to guiding the student to the right answers; then the answer will become his own—a conclusion he has formulated himself.

So these are the four basic motives in human beings: the motive to *master* the situation, the motive to *associate* with others, the urge to *conform*, and the urge to actively *investigate* the unknown. All motives are centered around a kind of sentiment of self-regard; so we might conclude that this sentiment is the basis for these motives. We may also conclude that these motives are present in everyone. Some people do not show the motives outwardly: the assumed sophistication of many adolescents hides their eagerness to socialize; other persons might bewilder us with their very candid attempts to conform, to be with people, or to know all the particulars. But whether the motives are on the surface or are “repressed,” *everyone* is driven into activity by them. For examples, study your own behavior.

Now we are all acquainted with the motives in the learning process. But what is “learning” itself? Does it follow any kind of pattern? The answer is yes, it does. Aside from the followers of Pavlov’s somewhat animal-like learning theory, most schools of psychology agree that learning occurs only when there is a problem before the student.² Assuming this is true, then, we may say that, in short, the pattern is much like the behavior of 17-year-old Jim who feels he *must* take a date to the Saturday night dance or else forever be a social outcast. So, *first*, he has the desire for mastery of a situation, for social approval, and for association with others. He is motivated. But, *second*, the problem arises when it is necessary for him to get a date in order to satisfy these motives. *Third*, he calls Ellen in an attempt to solve the problem. *Fourth*, Ellen either accepts or rejects his invitation. *Fifth*, Jim accordingly feels the tendency to ask Ellen for other dates, or (if she has refused the date) he might feel more comfortable if he forgot about Ellen and in the future asked Jane or Mary, whom he knows will accept.

Although very much over-simplified, this pattern of behavior is

2. Shaffer, *loc. cit.*; John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, and *How We Think*; Pressey and Robinson, *loc. cit.*; George D. Stoddard, *The Meaning of Intelligence*, Chapter 1.

the basis for the rest of the discussion. In more general terms, all learning goes like this:

1. The student is motivated to satisfy one need or—more likely—all four needs. He tries to accomplish this by proceeding toward certain goals. (Writing a satisfactory theme, for example.)
2. There are problems present which he must overcome. (Where can he find an idea about which to write? How will he organize the theme? Which words will best express himself in writing it?)
3. The student makes an attempt to overcome the problems and to satisfy the need he feels. (He writes the theme.)
4. He is successful in overcoming the problem and satisfying the need, or he fails and the problems and needs still exist. (Respectively, he has had something to say and he has said it satisfactorily, or he has been unable to find a topic or to express himself.)
5. He either tries the method again the next time because it is successful, or he tends to drop it altogether because it did not solve the problem or fill his needs. In other words, he either paves the way to correct habit formation, or he discards the habit. Either he is eager to write another theme and to begin a *habit* of honestly trying to write effectively, or he tends to regard theme-writing as drudgery because he achieved neither learning, social approval, nor mastery; for him, further writing might lead to more disapproval and failure.

This process seems simple, and it is. But there are some other interesting facts to remember about it:

To begin with, when a student has a strong motive, we know it stirs him to action. How long does this action last? It lasts until the motive is satisfied. In other words, if he cannot gain social recognition by writing an acceptable theme, he may turn to wisecracking in class, or to whispering, or even to writing the worst themes in class and bragging about them. Or, he may find satisfaction by rationalizing: he didn't want to write themes anyway; or, worst of all, he may develop a withdrawing type personality and experience his successes in his day dreams. Responses such as these, unhealthy as they are, *do* partially satisfy his motives. Therefore, our task remains to guide him toward the responses that help him to *learn* composition, and to develop or retain a healthy personality.

Next, we know that a student's emotions largely decide what he likes and dislikes. This ties in with his learning pattern, too. Pressey and Robinson say, "When an individual finds that what he is doing is meeting a felt need, he is pleasantly excited; but if his desires are frustrated he feels unpleasant emotion."³ We know, also, that creative work, such as writing, is suffused with emotional experiences. But how can we see that a student is "pleasantly excited" when he seems impervious to all our efforts to teach him correct punctuation, or paragraphing, or character sketching? To answer this question, we must look at some further laws of learning.

We have seen that if the student finds a successful solution to his problem—a solution that fills his needs—that solution will probably be used again and will eventually become a habit with him. We have also seen that if the student tries a solution that does *not* fill his needs, he will not try it again, but hunt for some other method. These are two principles in Thorndike's Law of Effect; but there is another one which is very important to teachers: if a student tries a solution, and finds that it is neither successful *nor* unsuccessful, and that he receives neither pleasure *nor* frustration, he likewise tends to drop that method of solution eventually.

This shows us that, first of all, we must hand back the student's papers with some kind of remark on them to show that he either failed or succeeded. Secondly, we must give the student that "pleasant excitement" of succeeding in *something* if we wish him to try again on his next theme with a heightened feeling of accomplishment. This means look for the *good* things in his paper, and *tell* him about them. For every *one* error we point out, we must find two or three good points. If nothing is correct but the title, write "good title" on his theme! He will repeat any good point; and he will probably improve on it, while the encouragement he has received will urge him to try harder to correct his bad habits.

On the other hand, those of us who mark the errors, but fail to mention the good points, cause worry and anxiety in a student, whether he shows it or not. We ourselves have felt it when a student just *couldn't* catch on. Likewise, the student feels it when he meets obstacle after obstacle. His compositions and grammar exercises continue to come back to him with red marks covering the pages. He receives very little encouragement, if any—and he just "doesn't know where to turn next." He tries many different ways to overcome his difficulty, including the less desirable ways

3. Sidney L. Pressey and Francis P. Robinson, *Psychology and the New Education*, Chapter XII.

we discussed above. Psychologists call this "diffuse activity." It comes from his *fear* that he will continue to fail again and again; he approaches each assignment from the negative "I-mustn't-do-this" angle instead of from the "I-will-do-this" angle. And so he does continue to fail. He makes the same mistakes over and over in his anxiety. One experiment on this type of behavior showed that four-fifths of the student who were continually told their *errors only*, repeated *continuously* the *wrong* responses.⁴ Some of us may have found the same ratios in our classes.

So we see the need for praise for a student. But these laws imply another thing for us: we must discover the student's errors before he begins to worry and builds up an attitude against writing themes. This means that we must not only mark the errors and good points; we must also *diagnose*. This is very important at the beginning of a semester, but the student needs it on every theme. Very often he makes mistakes because he is confused about—or ignorant of—only two or three grammar rules. When he can see these causes of mistakes, he will understand that all those red marks were not so many different errors, after all. We have shown him (1) that his paper wasn't as bad as it looked to him at first glance, and (2) that here is a way to master those mistakes before his next exercise or theme. He will not generalize and decide that the paper is all bad because it has three or four red marks on every page; instead he will be able to approach his problem intelligently.

By this time, we have seen how all-important it is to praise and analyze a student's efforts. A mass of red marks and a grade of "C" on a paper will convince a student that his attempt is a failure, at least in your eyes. He will assume that it is proof that he cannot write themes, and his "pleasant excitement" will be quelled for several weeks. He will not stop to see the cause of his errors.

On the other hand, if he should get the same paper back with the same grade of "C" but with the errors diagnosed *and* the virtues praised, he will again generalize and believe that he *did* master a large part of the assignment; this enthusiasm will continue to urge him to try harder the next time.

But there are other ways of administering praise besides the written remarks. By the time a child has reached adolescence, he has learned to understand other forms of approval and disapproval. A nod of the teacher's head is sometimes all-important in determining the student's attitude in future assignments. A smile or a frown is often understood by our students to mean complete approval

4. Shaffer, *opus cit.*, Chapter IV.

or complete disapproval. Other more public forms of showing approval give our students a chance for social recognition: publication of his efforts in the school paper or the departmental magazine, reading them before the class, or over the radio; or even our reading before the class one or two "good" sentences or paragraphs from his work will be reward enough to spur him on to new achievement.

Finally, we must remember this about praising our student: when he does show a good writing habit we must point it out to him *then*; we have seen how this response *can* completely disappear if it is neither praised nor blamed. His next theme may be too late for us to make a habit of this response, for he may never use this one again. Here is a question that arises now: By receiving constant approval of his work, will a student not grow *away* from reality and think himself better than he really is? The answer is no, if we also point out his errors, if we grade as objectively as possible, and (and this is most important) if we constantly keep smaller goals before him. There will be *one large* objective for the whole unit of work, but we should break that down into the smaller parts so the student can see just exactly where he is all the time. In fact, it is these smaller goals which help the student define the *problem*. He can also measure his progress as he strives toward the larger objective. This helps him to know whether he is succeeding or failing. In class planning, we might have our story-writing unit broken down into the description, character-sketch, and narrative parts. The necessity for this is plain: the student must know his progress, how he is succeeding and failing, and in what; he must know the direction in which he should guide his corrective activities. This will keep him lined up very closely with reality. In fact, if we help him to face his problem squarely and to set about correcting his habits intelligently, he can better apply his learning outside the classroom. In English, the student should be able to understand his specific errors; he should keep a chart of his progress in grades; and he should have the total course organization very clear in his mind so that he can see what he has done, what he is doing, and what he has yet to do.

This matter of a student's errors brings us another problem: How can we break those wrong habits which were *already* formed in the student before he came to us?

First of all, we must help him to see what *causes* his mistake: he must know *what* a "subordinate clause" is before he can understand why it is wrong to use it as a sentence. This *understanding* is the first step toward breaking any habit.

The second step is to drill himself again and again. He must aim to eliminate the *one* error. (He can drill on other errors with other exercises.) He must let no exception occur, or the old habit will be renewed.⁵

Third, he must *use* this response in his own themes and in his speech. Then it is up to us to *spot* the new habit in his next theme and to write our approving remark about it. This will further wipe out the old habit and will push the formation of the new one.

In following these three steps with our students, we can profit by another law which the psychologists have found: the errors *nearest* a goal are eliminated first; those farthest from the goal are eliminated second, and those errors in between are eliminated last.⁶ Obviously, we cannot move the student's errors any nearer to the class goal; but we can insert for him a *personal* goal which lies very near his error. The definite diagnosis will do this partly. Suggesting a deadline will also help: near the error, write, "Before your next theme, learn to put a comma between words in a series like these." This will start your three-point corrective program with the student more highly-motivated, and he will eliminate that habit more easily because he will be "eliminating the error nearest the goal first."

Now that we have the student well on his way to correct learning, let's look at that reverse process that plagues us all—forgetting. How much of this learning is going to stick with the student so he can write well in other courses, or express himself with his friends? The answer is in the same terms: just as much as he sees will help him in his everyday life.

Psychological tests can tell us when the student does most of his forgetting. Of a daily lesson, he does most of his forgetting by the next day; of a semester's work, he does most of it within the next six months.⁷ Our task here is plain: five minutes' review each day of the previous day's work will eliminate a large part of his forgetting. (We have already seen how repetition builds habit; it builds thought-habit, too.) Mid-term and term reviews will strengthen his retention, too, for future months. But there is one thing to remember about this reviewing process: the student himself must do the reviewing. *We* only ask the questions; *he* must answer them.

But what else besides lapse of time causes forgetting? We have all seen how some students forget one thing and other forget some-

5. Francis Shreve, *Psychology of the teaching of English*, Chapter II.

6. Francis Shaffer, *loc. cit.*

7. Pressey and Robinson, *opus. cit.*, Chapter XVI.

thing entirely different. Although he isn't always aware of it, the student forgets what he *wants* to forget, just as he learns what he wants to learn. Meltzer's experiment and many others show us that we all forget material according to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of the situation.⁸ If a student meets defeat in one paper, he will not only tend to forget the errors which caused him to fail, but he will forget many other principles of theme-writing, too. Psychologists call this "repression."

We may conclude, then, that if a student is going to remember the material, we must (1) see that he reviews daily and also at longer intervals, (2) make him see that the material fills one of his needs—or, in other words, satisfies one of his motives, and (3) help him to feel a certain sense of accomplishment after he writes a theme—give him a "reward" even if it is only a few encouraging remarks on his paper. And here is one extra thought about that last statement. Often repression occurs when the student feels that he must fear us and our criticism. We *must* keep our attitude one of appreciation for the efforts of the student. We must show him that we are here to help him, not to criticize him.

To summarize then, let us say that our job, as teachers, is to help the students find a way for composition to fit into their daily lives. After all, their learning takes place *all* the time, and in a world full of a variety of activities for each student. The minute we try to put our subject matter in an isolated vacuum, it is lost. Johnny is Johnny wherever he is, and the motivations that encourage him to learn to pitch also encourage him to learn to express himself effectively. The things he learns at one task will be of no value unless he can use them in the many other tasks in his life. Therefore, we must make his learning in composition connect directly with those basic motivations. This way, he will not forget his freshmen—or his senior—composition habits. When the learning is useful, and a part of his way of thinking and doing, forgetting is impossible.

II.

Here is a sample assignment to suggest one way to apply all these facts in our composition classes. (You will find many more ways; there are several for each assignment.) This assignment is broken down into four steps for the sake of discussion. The first one is:

I. WE MUST PREPARE OURSELVES FOR TEACHING. Sometimes we ruin a healthy democratic attitude in class because we do not

8. *Ibid.*

have our lessons prepared. We smile one minute, frown the next, and of course we are quite sensitive and nervous just because we are *afraid*; we are not sure of ourselves. When we *are* sure of ourselves, we will not be anxious to blame a student for a wrong answer. So, we should prepare our lessons a semester at a time, and have a good idea of what we are going to cover and when we are going to cover it. Then, from day to day we can review ourselves for the specific class hours. The over-all plan should be an elastic one, of course, so we can change it about to fit the individual class and the individual students in that class.

II. AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, GET TO KNOW EACH STUDENT. As our students sit before us the first day of school, we must remember that each one has different interests and abilities through which we can help him. It is our job to get to know his traits as soon as possible. This is the only answer to the dilemma of mass-but-individualized education. We can get to know our student by chatting with him or by getting information from the principal's or registrar's office. One instructor uses a still different method. He devotes the first day of class to getting his students to fill out a paper with their names, addresses, phone numbers, activities, hobbies, ambitions, work after school, and names and addresses of two close friends. Pressey, from Ohio State, states that this method is quite successful in both high school and college classes.⁹

When we know each student, we must have the ingenuity to adapt our materials and assignments to each student. Composition lends itself to this rather easily. But more about that below.

One warning: We should not jump to the conclusion that a student is a dull student unless we are sure of his health. Two-thirds of all children have some kind of physical defect.¹⁰ Many "dull" children only *seem* dull because they suffer from glandular disorders that give them low rates of metabolism; other suffer from poor eyesight; still others appear stupid because they cannot hear well; but the large majority of mistaken dullards are that way because they just do not find the proper motivation in composition.

III. MAKE YOUR PLANS KNOWN TO YOUR STUDENTS. We must let the student know in the first week everything they are expected to cover in the semester; we must go over our plans with them carefully. In this way they can see the importance of each unit of work. We should also let the students see a complete outline

9. Pressey, "Social and Useful College Classes," *School and Society*, v. 55, pp. 117-120.

10. Pressey and Robinson, *opus. cit.*, Chapter I.

of each sub-unit of work just before we begin it. Incidentally, if the student is exposed to this process consistently, he may get an idea of "organization" which he can use later in many other activities through his life.

IV. MAKE THE SPECIFIC ASSIGNMENT. As an example, let us take a study of character sketching. We all have to "help the student to learn" this at one time or another.

First of all, in making our assignment, we must remember to make it pleasant and positive. It should also be unhurried; therefore, it is best to make it at the beginning of the class hour. We should use the blackboard freely; if the students can *see* the assignment as well as hear it, they will understand the specific requirements better. We might begin the assignment, however, by asking *what* they would tell us if we wanted to know their fathers, yet could never meet them face-to-face. We should get the students to think about other questions, too: *Why* is it important to know how to sketch character? Of course, the answer which would interest their social motive most would be that character sketching would help them to recognize traits in their friends, and ultimately to understand people better. It is up to us to guide their discussion around to this conclusion, and any other "worthy" ones they may think of themselves.

The second step in this assignment would be, then, the setting up of work groups. In a class of thirty, we could quickly appoint (or call for volunteers) five heads for the groups. Each of these in turn can select five other committeemen. Each committee should read several character sketches; from these sketches, which can be found in any exposition text, each committee should decide upon the things which made the character sketches effective. We can guide the students in their search for a criterion by suggesting questions to them: What types of people were sketched? Was any narrative used? How much visual description was used? How did the sketches differ from each other? The students will educate each other and learn to adjust to each other's abilities and personalities. But best of all, for our purposes, they will stimulate each other as a teacher never could. And, they are learning in the natural, specific-to-general, inductive way.

The third thing to do in making the assignment is to combine the results from the committees. This may be done in the next class period. If so, a brief review of the discussion of "why character sketching is important" should take place during the first five minutes of the class hour. Then, we turn to our black board, and

combine the criteria of all five committees. This will take leadership on our part, and good judgment, for it is our job to help the class decide upon a very compact set of standards by which each person will write his own character sketch.

Then comes the first brief trial period. As soon as the standards have been decided upon, the students should have fifteen minutes to try their hands at a "test" sketch. One paragraph is long enough. The students can read them to the class, or they can divide up into the original committees again and find the way in which a particular student has followed the decided-upon criteria.

The fifth step would be, of course, the main sketch. This may be done during the next class hour, or at home. The criteria should be in front of each student as he writes. Each student should select his own topic—one that holds special interest for *him*.

Then comes the grading. We must remember to be as objective as possible. We must grade the themes with the class's criteria before us, also. Sometimes it is hard to remain uninfluenced by a very sloppy or a very distinguished handwriting. Sometimes, too, the subject matter or the name at the top of the paper influences us. One way to overcome this partly is to grade the paper once for subject content and again for grammar before putting the final grade on the paper. An additional help is to wait until the grade is on before we look at the name of the student. We will not be tempted then to raise or lower the grade because "Jimmy needs a good grade to encourage him," or, "Evelyn can do better; she just didn't try." Our psychological effects should be put in our remarks. Here is a more specific outline for theme-grading:

1. Be very specific in your criticisms; above all, be positive. Do not say, "Poor sentence structure," but "This phrase needs to be nearer the word it modifies."

2. Pick out the errors first, then go back through the theme and pick out the good points. Remember that if you do not call the student's attention to his small successes in this theme, he may not repeat them again. Be just as specific here. In case some themes seem rather hopeless on this point, here are some things to look for:

- a. Does he have an apt title on the theme? Is it expressive in any way?
- b. Does he have organization? Is it clear? Is it unobtrusive and yet under control? Does it show he thought it out beforehand?
- c. Does he have an opening sentence that catches the reader's interest? Does it lead him into the main theme well?
- d. Does he have any unusual expressions such as original similes, metaphors, etc.?

- e. Does he consistently obey one (or more) of the comma rules?
- f. Has he obeyed a usually tricky capitalization rule? (i.e.: capital for the first word of a direct quotation; capital for names of specific location, titles, or courses.)
- g. Does he have a neat paper?
- h. Does he have a legible hand?
- i. Do his paragraphs have either unity or coherence, or both?
- j. Are his pronoun references exact?
- k. Does he use parallel sentence structure for parallel ideas?
- l. Does he keep his phrases near the words they modify?
- m. Is his spelling above average? Or does he spell correctly a word that is usually misspelled?
- n. Does he show imagination in his selection of subject matter for the theme?
- o. Does he study carefully before drawing any conclusions?
- p. Does he show that he has been "thinking" about such matter, for instance, as religion, national or foreign affairs, personality development, etc.?
- q. Does he see more than one side of the personality he is sketching? Or, in other themes, of the issue involved?
- r. Does he use any especially apt or specific words in his description? Or any words that show that his vocabulary is either above-normal or is growing?
- s. Does he follow any or all of the criteria set up for this theme by the class?
- t. Does he show, for the first or second time in this theme, a newly-corrected grammar habit?

Be sure that you take special note of any student who persists in the same errors through his theme. These are the students who should see you for a thorough explanation of the error, and for practice. Give them sentences to work on. If your own originality plays out after the one-hundredth example, you can always turn to the exercises in work books for more examples and exercises. Work on only one error at a time, and remember to be helpful and encouraging at all times.

The seventh step is to hand back the themes. The students should enter the grade in the progress charts; this will enable them to keep a very clear idea of their progress. Ask for volunteers to read their themes—one representative from each of the original committees, perhaps. The members of the class should jot down the criterion points which the student has followed. After each reading, the whole class can discuss each theme.

This is only one illustration. The same principles should be applied to every type of composition that the students learn to write. Grammar is also included: the first step would be to look over all the examples that contain the rule you want to teach your students. Then, hand the examples to them. If it is nouns you are

teaching, ask them to try to find out what all the underlined words (nouns) have that the other words don't have. And so, proceed much as we did in the example above. When the students do the thinking *themselves*, they will remember it much longer.

But before they will be interested enough to *do* the thinking themselves, they must feel that they are satisfying their basic motives. It is our task to generate this interest in them, to integrate our class work with their own motives, and to make our main aim *their* learning, not *our* teaching.

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PERIODICALS

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ATTEND THE ANNUAL FALL MEETING

The Illinois Association of Teachers of English cordially invites all English teachers to its annual meeting in Urbana on Saturday, October 29. The following sessions have been arranged, all on the University of Illinois campus:

Business meeting—9:30 a. m., 100 Gregory Hall

Talk by Jesse Stuart—10:30 a. m., 112 Gregory Hall

Luncheon meeting—12:00 noon, 314 N, Illini Union

A side attraction will be the football game between Illinois and Michigan, at 1:30.

We hope you can make arrangements to spend a pleasant and profitable autumn day on the campus. Bring along colleagues. Make reservations for the luncheon by returning the blank below.

Illinois English Bulletin
204a Lincoln Hall
Urbana, Illinois

Please reserve _____ plates for me at the October 29 luncheon of the Illinois Association of Teachers of English.

Name _____

Address _____

ABOUT JESSE STUART

The poems of Jesse Stuart, brawny six-foot farmer from the hill country of Kentucky, have won him the title of "The American Robert Burns." The stories he tells of his home country and the people who live there have established him as one of America's leading novelists.

Jesse Stuart was principal of a Greenup County, Kentucky, high school in 1935 when, like Byron, he "woke one morning and found himself famous." A collection of more than 700 of his poems, entitled *Man With a Bull-Tongue Plow*, had become a nationwide success and he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship. He followed with short stories which rivalled in excellence his moving poetry. More than 300 of his short stories have been published in leading magazines, and he has been represented in both the 1936 O'Henry Anthology, edited by Harry Hansen, and in the Best Short Stories in 1936, edited by Edward J. O'Brien. A collection of his stories, *Head O'W-Hollow*, was published in 1936, and another, *Men of the Mountains*, won the Academy of Arts and Sciences award. The story of his boyhood and youth, *Beyond Dark Hills*, which was originally written as a term paper at Vanderbilt University in 1932, was published in 1938, and his first novel, *Trees of Heaven*, was issued in 1940. *Taps for Private Tussie*, his second novel, was a 1943 Book-of-the-Month Club selection and a national best seller. His other published works are *Mongrel Mettle*, *Album of Destiny*, and *Foretaste of Glory*. His tenth book, *Tales From the Plum Grove Hills*, was issued the fall of 1946.

Jesse Stuart's writings reflect the tremendous vigor and vitality of a young man who has lived close to the soil and whose hopes and dreams are rooted there. Born in Riverton, Kentucky, he attended country schools part-time and helped his father plant and harvest crops; hunted rabbits, fox and 'possums. When he was nine, he began to hire out to well-to-do farmers, working a twelve-hour day for twenty-five cents. At eleven he left school to help his family.

But his desire for learning was not easily smothered. Four years later he took a brush-up course in grammar, entered high school and was graduated. He attended Lincoln Memorial College in Tennessee, earning his tuition by working in the hay fields, digging water lines and cleaning manholes. He became editor of his college paper and completed his undergraduate work in three years. Later, he took a year of graduate work at Vanderbilt University.

"Ever since I can remember," Mr. Stuart says, "I wanted to be a writer. I don't know exactly why. It is just a part of me. Kentucky is my heritage—a pioneer fighting family, rustic as all get-out, the one-room school, moonshining, homemade tobacco, the fight for one another, the square dances, the high hills, the matted brush on the jagged slopes, the oak trees and wild flowers, the hawks, buzzards, snakes, 'possums and hound-dogs. These are things I have grown up among, the things I know, if I know anything at all, and these are the things I hope to keep."

It is this moving and faithful reproduction of life in his home country which has made Jesse Stuart an outstanding leader in the development of regional literature. And with it is this same direct honest and simple approach to life that makes his talk, "An Hour With Jesse Stuart," a delightful and inspiring experience.

ENGLISH NEWS NOTES

Elgin: The Elgin English staff was on the move this summer. Enid Burns spent a month in Europe, Helen Jocelyn saw a bull fight and volcano in Mexico, and Kenneth Ettner spent a week traveling with the Ringling Brothers circus. Helen Kocher and Margaret Newman attended Bread Loaf, in the Green Mountains, and Byrus Hall attended Columbia, taking a course in play production which took him backstage in New York theaters.

Danville: Miss Mary Miller is now Dean of the Danville Community College, in addition to being Head of the English Department and Director of Dramatics in Danville High School. She spent a summer month traveling in Colorado and New Mexico and two weeks attending the Junior College Workshop at Denver University, where she studied problems in Junior College Administration and worked on a new course in Freshman English for the new Danville Community College.

Urbana: Professor Charles W. Roberts has been granted a second semester leave of absence from the University of Illinois. He plans to work on a book on the teaching of composition at the college level.

Send news items to Margaret E. Newman, Elgin High School, Elgin, Illinois.

RENEW NOW FOR 1949-1950

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421 South Oak Park Avenue
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